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# Introduction to symposium on private agrifood governance: values, shortcomings and strategies

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## Introduction

The governance of global food and agriculture is being transformed as the food system has become more globalized and as corporate control of that system has become more concentrated. Traditionally the domain of governmental and intergovernmental actors, the governance of food and agriculture is increasingly becoming not just influenced, but also “created” by corporate actors via private governance mechanisms. These mechanisms include industry-set quality and safety standards, private codes of conduct, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. While the literature has paid considerable attention to the globalization of the agrifood system more broadly (Bonanno et al. 1994) and has begun to look at the role of corporations in the system (Clapp and Fuchs 2009),

empirical research on private governance mechanisms in global food and agriculture governance is only just starting to emerge. We still require considerably more insight on the nature of the private governance mechanisms and their impact on fundamental values and core objectives of food governance.

The rise of private governance mechanisms in the agrifood system poses challenges for several fundamental values and core objectives of food governance. In particular, the privatization of key aspects of the agrifood governance system raises questions about their ability to uphold democratic legitimacy and to promote sustainability. How do democratic ideals fit with private actors generating rules and regulations that transcend national borders moving to spaces previously occupied by states (Schaller 2007)?<sup>1</sup> After all, the private actors creating these mechanisms used to be considered (mainly) objects rather than subjects of governance, whose activities needed to be regulated in the interest of society. Yet, it is these actors who create and implement rules and standards today and thereby strongly influence the sustainability of the global agrifood system.

The sustainability of the global agrifood system, in turn, is an essential precondition for the well-being of societies world-wide. Both social and environmental aspects of sustainability need to be considered. Food security and food safety need to be provided for individuals to be able to sustain healthy and productive lives. At this point in time, neither food security nor food safety is fully ensured. Over one billion people suffer from hunger and 6 million people die from malnutrition and contaminated food and water every year (FAO 2009). Moreover, millions of small

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<sup>1</sup> One has to acknowledge, of course, that private governance transcends the borders of non-democratic states as well.

farmers across the globe, and especially in developing countries, depend on food production for their well-being. This dynamic is also significant from a gender perspective, as in most developing countries women are responsible for 60–80% of food production. Similarly, they are still the primary ones responsible for food preparation in most countries and cultures around the world. Environmental dimensions are also important for sustainability, as food production is intimately tied to the issues of soil, water, biodiversity and emissions among other things.

What then are the implications of private food governance for the democratic legitimacy of global agrifood governance and the sustainability of the global agrifood system? With respect to democratic legitimacy, one could argue that private agrifood governance simply mobilizes additional resources in the pursuit of public objectives in times and cases in which states either cannot or will not commit to public governance due to the limits of their jurisdiction, a lack of resources, or conflicting interests. With respect to sustainability, private food governance mechanisms may help ensure the safety and quality of food products as well as foster improvements for the environmental and social conditions of the food system, as they tend to state in their objectives.

However, as several critical scholars have noted, the knowledge we actually have about these private governance institutions and their impact, especially in developing countries, is very limited (Blowfield 2005, 2007; Margolis and Welsh 2003). Much of the knowledge we have is based on a few case studies and corporate self-reporting. Moreover, both theoretical and empirical studies point to the potential drawbacks of private governance institutions for the democratic legitimacy of global agrifood governance and the sustainability of the global agrifood system. Thus, scholars draw our attention to the danger that private institutions may circumvent or undermine public national and international law (Haufler 1999; O'Rourke 2003). They highlight the potentially pre-emptive character of private standards, which allows companies to avoid harder and more binding state regulation with respect to social or environmental objectives, and voice concerns regarding the lack of effective monitoring (Fuchs 2007; Greven 2004).

Interestingly, the questions raised above have so far received little systematic attention in scientific debate. Empirical research on the impacts of private governance on the democratic legitimacy of global agrifood governance and the sustainability of the global agrifood system is just starting to emerge. This is particularly noteworthy, as private governance mechanisms have expanded dramatically in global agrifood governance and now exist in a vast variety of forms and with a range of foci in almost all spheres of the global agrifood system.

This symposium on Global Private Agrifood Governance therefore explores the nature and implications of private agrifood institutions for fundamental values and core objectives of food governance, in particular democratic legitimacy and sustainability. It does so by gathering a group of articles on private agrifood institutions with a diversity of empirical foci, thereby providing a broad view of private agrifood governance at different levels and regions. The articles by Catia Gregoratti and Anne Tal-lontire examine public-private partnerships and self-regulation respectively in sub-Saharan Africa, while the article by Doris Fuchs, Agni Kalfagianni, and Tetty Havinga focuses on retail food governance. Then, Lena Partzsch evaluates the legitimacy of private food governance in the cases of the biofuel industry, while Christopher Kaan and Andrea Liese discuss public-private partnerships in global food governance. Martha McMahon, in turn, analyzes the fate of Canadian women farmers between private and public regulation, before Lawrence Busch returns the argument to a broader level and inquires into the underlying causes and ethical consequences of current trends in private food governance. Finally, Spencer Henson provides a commentary on the group of articles gathered in this symposium and their assessment of the nature and implications of private agrifood governance. With this range of empirical foci and the implications of private institutions for fundamental norms and values in global agrifood governance as a common core analytical objective, the seven papers and commentary aim to produce a basis for the systematic study of the private agrifood governance. As such, this symposium hopes to contribute theoretical and empirical insights on new important developments in private food governance and their implications and thus fill a significant gap in the literature.

The theme for this symposium emerged from a conference on Private Food Governance organized in Münster, Germany. At this conference, scholars from a variety of disciplines and countries as well as representatives of major international organizations in the food sector, such as FAO, discussed the impact of business-led food governance institutions on the fundamental norms and values of global agrifood governance. The key issue addressed by the conference and in consequence this symposium is the democratic legitimacy of private agrifood governance. The articles gathered here address this issue in terms of the dimensions of participation, transparency, and accountability at different governance levels (see also Porter and Ronit 2010). Moreover, they link their findings on democratic standards and legitimating mechanisms of private agrifood governance to sustainability. Thereby, they provide insight on what private food governance can and cannot achieve. Finally, the articles also address a range of additional analytical issues, such as the normative origin of

the rise of private agrifood governance, the public-private interface, gender relationships, and activities of resistance. The common analytical thread of all articles, however, is their focus on private governance mechanisms, and their attention to democratic legitimacy and, at least indirectly, sustainability. After a short overview on the rise of private agrifood governance, we explain each in some detail below.

### Private mechanisms in global agrifood governance

Today's global food governance is characterized by an increasing role taken by private governance structures and institutions (FAO 2006). These private governance mechanisms claim to ensure the safety and quality of food products as well as to improve environmental and social conditions of the food system. There is a range of private governance mechanisms in the food sector, including corporate social responsibility initiatives, codes of conduct, and private standards. These are sometimes developed and operated in the context of public-private and private-private partnerships, with corporate actors cooperating with other actors, including the state and non-governmental organizations (see Gregoratti and Kaan and Liese in this symposium). Some initiatives are wholly developed by corporate actors and can be seen as private, industry-led standards (see Fuchs et al., Tallontire, Partzsch, and McMahon in this symposium).

Corporate Social Responsibility efforts include measures to raise corporate awareness as well as reports of business activities which touch on social, human rights, and environmental themes. The idea is that such reporting will foster transparency and ultimately improve firms' performance on these fronts (Gupta 2008). Firms hope to benefit economically from reporting, as it enhances their reputation amongst consumers as well as investors. Firms may undertake reporting on their own terms, or in accordance with the guidelines for such reports as set out by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). The GRI, established in 2000, is a set of guidelines that seeks to standardize CSR reports across firms to ensure completeness and comparability, and firms that adhere to these guidelines can be certified as having followed these guidelines. There are at present around 1,000 firms that report in accordance with the GRI, and a number of these firms are in the food and agriculture sector. These include firms at the agricultural input end of the spectrum, as well as those in the processing and retail ends of the global food and agriculture industry.<sup>2</sup> Although a number of firms in the agro-food

industry utilize these guidelines, there are some notable absences, such as Wal-Mart, which follow their own format.

Codes of conduct can be understood as written guidelines on the basis of which companies deal with their workforce, suppliers, state authorities and external stakeholders in their host country (Greven 2004). Such codes are not necessarily "certifiable," though in some instances they can be. Some codes are specific to the food and agriculture sector. Some producers, such as Chiquita, have codes that deal with labor rights. In the agricultural input industry, for example, codes on the safe use of pesticides and on the safe handling of genetically modified organisms exist or are currently being developed (see Clapp 2008). One of the more general codes is the Global Compact of the United Nations, which was established in 1999 and which calls on participating firms to adhere to 10 key principles for good corporate behavior, including social and environmental considerations. There are some 4,000 firms as participants in the Global Compact, including a number of firms in the food and agricultural sector—from the input sector to the retail sector.<sup>3</sup>

Private standard-setting is a form of private governance that has mushroomed in recent years in the food sector, particularly in the retail sector. Private standards set out specific principles and criteria for quality, environmental, social or ethical characteristics of products and processes, which frequently cover more than one stage of the supply chain. Private standards tend to be voluntary in nature and rely on various sorts of certification mechanisms to identify actors complying with the principles defined in the standard (see below, however, for the limits to the voluntariness of the standards). As certification, in turn, can be defined as condition for access by later actors in the supply chain, private standards play a market structuring role.<sup>4</sup>

Private standards are distinguished as product and process standards. Product standards refer to various characteristics embodied in the product itself, for instance quality or safety. Process standards refer to the methods by which the product was made (or in the case of food items, grown). Process standards specify the characteristics that the processes are expected to have, either to produce products with specific attributes (e.g., organic, safe) or to create and maintain certain conditions for the environment, workers and other stakeholders (Reardon et al. 2001). Standards cover a variety of issues at all levels of the food chain, ranging from food safety and quality to environmental management and workers' rights. Examples of private

<sup>2</sup> The GRI is at present developing a sector specific set of guidelines for the food processing sector (see <http://www.globalreporting.org>).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see <http://www.unglobalcompact.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Corporate social responsibility and codes of conduct exercise an influence on the market as well, although in a less direct and comprehensive manner.

standards in the food chain include the Global Food Safety Initiative, GlobalGap, International Food Standard and Ethical Trading Initiative (see Fuchs et al. and Tallontire in this symposium).

A number of trends have led to the dramatic expansion in private standards. As will be apparent in articles gathered in this symposium, the over-arching context of neo-liberalism, with its emphasis on privatization, deregulation and the reliance on market mechanisms, have created a political space for private actors and attributed particular value to their knowledge and interests (see Busch in this symposium in particular). In addition and in conjunction with this development, the global agrifood system has witnessed an increasing level of capital concentration at the various stages of the supply chain. This capital concentration has led in recent years to the establishment of an oligopoly at the retail end of the supply chain, which has given the expansion in private governance additional impetus (Burch and Lawrence 2005; Konefal et al. 2005). These larger trends have been supported by the development of new technologies of supply-chain management which allowed for the corporate control of the product chain from farm to fork, as well as competition among firms that is based not only on price but also on quality. As a result of these processes, private rules and standards play a pivotal role in agrifood governance today.

With these private governance mechanisms, then, business actors increasingly are involved in the design, implementation and enforcement of rules and principles governing the global food system at various points in the sector from inputs to production to retail. As was mentioned earlier, however, there is little systematic knowledge on the implications of this development and concerns have arisen about potentially negative impacts on the democratic legitimacy of global agrifood governance and the sustainability of the global agrifood system. With respect to CSR reporting on the part of food industry actors, for instance, there is concern that because the reporting is itself voluntary, there are few sanctions against firms that engage in practices that may lead to environmental or social harm. For example, a firm that engages in unsustainable activities may fail to report, or may report only partial information, or may fully disclose problems that have emerged. The same is the case for codes of conduct. Firms that flout the principles of the Global Compact, for example, face only minimal consequences. In any of these cases, there is no external mechanism to hold firms accountable (Clapp 2008).

Likewise, private standards frequently address only selective aspects of sustainability (Fuchs et al. 2009). Moreover, their structural power provides an important additional source of concern. These “voluntary” standards, though set privately, in a way “govern” the market, in that

firms will want to adhere to them, because being certified is crucial to maintaining market access. This, in turn, means that despite the *de jure* voluntary character of private standards, they become *de facto* compulsory especially for the supply side (Blowfield 2005). Indeed, many of the private standards and initiatives in the food sector are developed collectively by corporate actors, thus limiting suppliers’ market choices; in other words, the latter simply have to accept them (Busch 2000).

The pivotal role of private institutions in today’s global food governance raises questions about their implications for the nature of the global agrifood system, specifically the balance between public and private interests. In fact, fundamental objectives of agrifood governance, in particular food safety but also the environmental and social sustainability of the agrifood system, are increasingly part of companies’ CSR initiatives, codes of conduct, or private standards. The pursuit of private economic interests does not necessarily run counter to the pursuit of the public interest, of course. At the same time, there is no guarantee that the pursuit of private economic interests fosters the public interest. In consequence, one has to ask what private governance means for public objectives in global agrifood governance.

### Private food governance and democratic legitimacy

As noted above, increasing privatization of food governance has raised questions about democratic legitimacy. Clearly, many developments in the global agrifood systems are transnational and difficult for nation states alone to control today (Van Waarden 2008). For example, contaminated food may spread quickly and be difficult to trace. Yet, private rules created among members of a “club,” but affecting myriads of people in a multitude of locations, raise critical questions about people’s autonomy under law, the fundamental principle of democracy. Due to the pivotal role of corporate actors in global agrifood governance today, but also their ambivalent implications for the sustainability of the global food system, there is a need to tie their activities to some notion of democracy.

Obviously any attempt to do so with traditional notions of democracy will fail as fundamental democracy requirements are violated. Private actors are not elected. Yet, food safety and quality, and environmental and social sustainability, are public goods, and the practices followed by corporations in the food sector affect the lives of millions of people. Scholars propose, then, different indicators for the examination of democratic forms of governance beyond the state.

In this symposium, the contributors emphasize the criteria of participation, transparency and accountability,



which have become the core tools for evaluations of the legitimacy of private governance in the literature (Porter and Ronit 2010; Schaller 2007). These criteria are universally accepted democratic values and have been employed to evaluate and improve the legitimacy of private and public governance at the national level. The novelty as well as challenge here is both the private nature of the governance institutions considered as well as their global dimension, which in turn increases the diversity of publics affected and associated complexity of impacts.

From a democratic perspective, participation should include all the actors who are potentially affected in order to ensure their autonomy under law or elected representation. In global food governance this implies the identification of a functionally defined *demos* sharing a common fate and affected by the same threats, rather than one based on territory (Van Waarden 2008). Autonomy presupposes equality as it is difficult to imagine freedom under law if it is not equally possible for all to participate in the positing of the law (Castoriadis 1997). Thus, participation is defined in terms of access of all relevant actors in the development of standards and equality among the actors in the decision-making procedures.

Transparency is a fundamental condition for the democratic legitimacy of private governance mechanisms too (Gupta 2008). If private actors develop their own rules, then at least the procedures for developing such rules should be open to public scrutiny. A lack of transparency can render access meaningless, even in cases where it exists, by obscuring the real options for which actors can “vote” (Fuchs and Kalfagianni 2010a). Transparency is not given, furthermore, if scrutiny refers to technical aspects of food production only while socially relevant aspects are left out. Moreover, a lack of transparency further restricts control possibilities which are already minimal as global political processes become more complex and it is difficult to determine who is responsible. One has to acknowledge, of course, that transparency for private entities is problematic to the extent that we expect private entities to keep certain information private. What is in dispute is which information can be kept private and which should be kept public.

Next to questions of participation and transparency, finally, accountability is a crucial issue when it comes to democratic governance (Clapp and Utting 2008). Accountability can be distinguished in its internal and external dimensions. Internal accountability needs to be provided towards the stakeholders participating in the ownership of the standards and initiatives through mechanisms such as reporting and peer control. External accountability needs to be provided towards the affected public. Here, the role of auditing third-party organizations, for instance, has been proposed as a mechanism of providing external accountability (Furger 1997). The extent to

which third-party auditing can provide for external accountability, however, is controversial (see below).

Next to participation, transparency, and accountability, output legitimacy has been proposed as a criterion of democratic legitimacy (Bäckstrand 2006; Scharpf 1998). Output legitimacy presupposes that the effectiveness in achieving a given objective can serve as a source of legitimacy. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to measure effectiveness in the absence of participation and transparency (Fuchs and Kalfagianni 2010a). Different stakeholders will define different aspects of the global food system as objectives for agrifood governance. Thus, representatives of corporations and of environmental or development NGOs, for example, raise different demands towards private standards in general and therefore identify different benchmarks for measuring their effectiveness. In consequence, there is no objective measure of the “effectiveness” of a private governance institution. At the same time, measuring the effectiveness of a private governance institution simply against its self-set objectives does not provide a solution either. After all, these objectives may be set at such low levels, for instance, that the achievement of these objectives could not possibly be seen as a source of legitimacy. In consequence, output legitimacy cannot serve as a useful tool in assessments of the legitimacy of private governance institutions in general and private agrifood governance institutions in particular.

When applying the criteria of participation, transparency and accountability to the cases of private agrifood governance studied in this symposium, then, we find the following. Presently, substantial asymmetries in access and participation prevent the creation of equal opportunities for different societal actors to influence private food governance institutions. Many cases of the private food governance institutions analyzed show that the participation of major stakeholders has been lacking or is constrained by highly unsatisfactory institutional frameworks (see Fuchs et al., Partzsch, and Gregoratti in this symposium). Thus, questions need to be asked about who is invited to participate, as well as how and who actually is represented in the decision making bodies of private food governance. In the biofuels industry, for instance, Southern actors are regularly excluded from governance processes (Partzsch in this symposium). Likewise, the Growing Sustainable Business Initiative of the United Nations Development Program failed to include Kenya’s smallholders, who were supposed to be its beneficiaries (Gregoratti in this symposium).

Similar to the issue of participation, the question of transparency provides a serious challenge to the democratic legitimacy of private food governance, as the various studies show. Private rules and standards are rarely open to public scrutiny. In other words, private governance institutions frequently fail to provide information about

international governance structures and processes (Fuchs et al. in this symposium). This is related to the frequent exclusion of civil society in the monitoring and implementation of standards. Such a constrained transparency can render access, even where it exists, meaningless. At the same time, the growing differentiation of food standards resulting from multiple ways of certification is creating an extremely difficult situation for market participants (Busch in this symposium).

Finally, accountability is only provided in a limited sense in most of the cases analyzed as well. While internal and external accountability in a narrow sense tend to exist in some form, the actors creating the private governance institutions are at best accountable to a very small share of the people affected by their activities. Both transparency and accountability tend to suffer from the problems created by the asymmetries in participation, as the cases studies show. Yet, these asymmetries in participation are difficult to remedy. After all, the resources of farmers from the South or even “large” civil society organizations from the North are severely limited relative to the resources of business actors. In consequence, efforts to help these disadvantaged groups to play a more active role will require substantial financial and organizational support.

### The sustainability of private food governance

We understand sustainability to cover the issues of food security and food safety, as well as environmental and social aspects of food governance. More specifically, we consider food security and food safety fundamental aspects for the ability of populations to live healthy, productive and happy lives. Food insecurity, in particular, remains a problem for millions of people while its range and consequences have been aggravated by the recent food crisis. More specifically, soaring food prices in 2007 and 2008 worsened the prevalence of food insecurity and malnutrition among the poor by reducing the quantity and quality of food consumed, especially in the developing world (Clapp 2009). FAO estimates that, today, world hunger is increasing with the number of hungry people passing 1 billion by 2009, an increase of over 100 million in 2008 alone (FAO 2009).

Previous research has indicated that private food governance has ambivalent effects. Thus, some studies have argued that private certification schemes threaten to push small farmers out of the market in favor of large agribusiness and food processors (FAO 2006, 2008; Fuchs et al. 2009; Hatanaka et al. 2005). Others have shown that private food governance can help to improve food safety through the establishment of traceability mechanisms, even though such efforts fail to provide security against food

crises and health scares. Some studies have highlighted that social provisions, such as worker welfare but also gender non-discrimination and rules against sexual harassment, are much more rarely included in private food governance. Where they are included, they have only limited coverage and play a secondary role in relation to food safety standards (Barrientos et al. 2001; Dolan 2005; Fuchs and Kalfagianni 2010b). Finally, research has documented that private governance addresses certain environmental issues, through a focus on eco-efficiency or recycling programs, while pointing out the selective and limited nature of the measures at the same time. Thus, important aspects such as biodiversity are not included (Bebbington 2001; Springett 2003; Clapp 2008).

Clearly then, there is a need for systematic analysis of the impact of private food governance on sustainability (FAO 2006). Thus, it is desirable to scrutinize the articles in this symposium for information on the implications of private governance institutions on sustainability. Again, such an investigation supports earlier research in demonstrating that private food governance has ambivalent effects on the sustainability of the global agrifood system. Specifically, private food governance is likely to address only selected sustainability issues. The criterion for selection, in turn, appears to be consumer interests and the corresponding marketability, or opportunities for business profit in more general terms. In consequence, many governance initiatives address issues like product quality and safety, while broader issues, such as farmer livelihoods or the right to food, are neglected (see Fuchs et al., Partzsch, Tallontire, and Liese and Kaan in this symposium). In fact, these issues do conflict in current practice. The objectives of food safety and product quality mean that traceability schemes, which are associated with substantial costs for producers in terms of documentation and transparency requirements, play a pivotal role in global food governance. For small farmers, these costs are difficult to bear and carry the risk that these farmers will be pushed out of the market and forced into subsistence farming and hunger.<sup>5</sup> One of the major shortcomings of private food governance in terms of sustainability, then, appears to be its effect on rural livelihoods, as food safety concerns overrule food security interests, and corporations pass economic risk as well as implementation costs along to the weaker actors at the beginning of the supply chain (Fuchs et al., and Tallontire in this symposium). This situation can be linked to the question of participation in the creation of private governance institutions discussed above.

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, small farmers suffer from the power asymmetries in public-private partnerships, as participating corporations may simply replace them with other small farmers where economically beneficial (see Gregoratti in this symposium).

These findings do not mean that private governance cannot be made to work for small farmers, too. However, a better integration of social criteria and local knowledge and practice in private governance institutions as well as financial and organizational assistance by corporations, IGOs, or NGOs is required for small farmers to benefit from the market opportunities that private food governance can provide. Such improvements in private food governance, then, would allow the simultaneous pursuit of a macroeconomic competitiveness agenda and poverty alleviation. However, for this potential to be fulfilled, participation conditions in private governance mechanisms would need to change.

There is also an alternative to the integration of small farmers into a market ruled by private governance institutions. Thus, some farmer collectives and NGOs emphasize the maintenance and development of structures and networks allowing small farmers to successfully work outside of private standards. Organizations of small scale women farmers on Vancouver Island, for instance, have established their markets independent of large retail corporations and the standards prescribed by them (McMahon in this symposium).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the limited coverage of private standards when it comes to sustainability objectives has to be seen as a major problem. While private governance institutions may provide some solutions to narrow and clearly defined sustainability problems and issues, they fail to provide improvements and, in fact, can worsen the situation with respect to broader issues such as rural welfare, biodiversity, or the general fight against hunger.

## Conclusions

This guest-edited symposium on Private Agrifood Governance explores the implications of the dramatic expansion in private governance institutions in different areas and sectors of the global agrifood system. A particular focus in this endeavor is on the implications for democratic legitimacy and, to a lesser extent, on sustainable development and the interaction between them. With respect to democratic legitimacy, the articles address issues such as participation, transparency, and accountability with respect to a variety of private governance institutions and at different levels of governance. With respect to sustainability, the articles depict the impact of private governance on aspects ranging from narrowly defined food safety to broader

issues such as biodiversity and rural welfare. In addition, the articles offer a number of further analytical insights. Some of them emphasize the relationship of private food governance to neoliberal norms and ideas, which have allowed market-led initiatives to play a pivotal role in addressing food governance failures. Others explore the public-private interface noting that public actors are neither necessarily better guardians of the public interest nor more sensitive to sustainability objectives. Still others examine gender relationships and activities of resistance. An additional insight offered is the inquiry into the ethical implications and underlying causes of current trends in food governance. The critical evaluation of most articles regarding the legitimacy and outcomes of private mechanisms sparks a dynamic debate on the limits and virtues of private food governance.

The symposium aims to fill a significant gap to the study of private food governance. Now that the general trend of expanding private food governance has been identified, there is more room for empirical investigation. Thus, it appears particularly apt to follow up on earlier research with work that (a) explores the empirical details through more specific case studies and (b) now turns to look very pointedly and systematically at the implications for legitimacy and sustainability across a range of cases. Thereby, the symposium aims to respond to the need for more methodical and comprehensive analysis of the role of private agrifood governance institutions and their broader political and societal impact.

The findings of the symposium have given support to a rather critical view on these newly emerging governance methods. In this view, the question of the democratic legitimacy of private governance is crucial, since its implications for sustainability are ambivalent at best. The profound negative impacts of unsustainable global food production processes are unlikely to be resolved by private governance institutions alone. In fact, the symposium has highlighted that some of these governance institutions actually worsen an already highly unsatisfactory situation.

How does the role of private agrifood governance relate to the recent food crisis, then? Clearly, private agrifood governance is neither the only structural cause nor even the prime impetus behind this crisis. Decades of agricultural subsidies and closed markets in the North as well as a neglect of agricultural investment in developing countries, for instance, had already put enormous strain on small farmers in the South. Likewise, bad harvests and correspondingly low stocks of wheat and rice, rising crude oil prices, the expansion in biofuel production, and financial speculation in agricultural futures contributed heavily to the dramatic increase in food prices in the short run. Still, one can recognize that private agrifood governance furthers the marginalization of small farmers and destruction of

<sup>6</sup> The same case shows as well, however, how the interaction between public and private regulation can have a negative effect, as public meat inspection standards shaped by private lobbies in this case impose costs on the farmers and force them out of business.



family farming in the South, thus not alleviating but worsening the effects of the crisis.

This observation reestablishes the link to the role of public agrifood governance, which, after all, has problems with respect to its democratic legitimacy and impact on sustainability as well. From the perspective of Southern producers, standards set by the EU or the US are likely not to carry any more democratic legitimacy than private food standards. Still, in the end those standards were adopted by elected governments. More importantly, they did not claim to ensure sustainable development in the broad sense. To the extent that private governance claims to pursue this objective successfully, however, it may preempt future public efforts. Clearly, however, the cases of the US and EU agricultural trade politics just like the public hygiene standards in Canada mentioned above show that public governance can be just as problematic as private governance, especially if it ends up being public governance in the private interest.

Thus, this symposium does not aim to highlight the pitfalls of private agrifood governance against the background of an assumption of the perfect nature of public agrifood governance. Rather, it analyzes the implications of private food governance due to the vast expansion in its extent and reach in the last decade. It is due to this expansion that we urgently need to know what its strengths and weaknesses are and how the latter can be reduced.

Where do we go from here then? The articles gathered in this symposium indicate a number of interesting topics and approaches for further research. They point to the potentially interesting insights to be gained from studies that reduce the actor-centeredness in the focus and look at processes when assessing private agrifood governance. After all, the setting in which private governance institutions exist is not passive and fixed. Instead private governance institutions have to be seen as dynamic processes continuously changed by contextual developments in actors and structures. These changes and their determinants, then, deserve particular attention.

In addition, the interaction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of global agrifood governance needs to be explored further as well as the interconnectedness between public and private governance. Moreover, additional momentum may be gained from analyses conceptualizing private agrifood governance institutions as constitutive of actors (interests and identities) and not just functional instruments (regulation). From this perspective, the discursive nature and power of private agrifood governance moves to the centre of attention. Finally, there is urgent need to compare the food sector with other sectors, of course, in order to compare and contrast developments thereby putting the pieces of the puzzle together and creating a clearer picture of global governance as such.

On the political side, the necessary next steps are becoming clear as well. Private agrifood governance needs to improve its record on participation, transparency, and accountability. In addition, it needs to integrate social and broader environmental issues in its principles and standards. In its current form, private agrifood governance fosters a widening of the gap in access to food as well as food governance. These improvements can derive from the private actors creating and implementing private agrifood governance institutions or they can be ensured through the embedding of these institutions in an adequate public regulatory framework. Thus, pressure on public actors to take responsibility and fulfill their role is just as necessary.

One area, which has to be of key concern for public intervention in the global agrifood system, is the existing level of horizontal and vertical capital concentration in the food value chain. The oligopolies which have developed in the last decades and continue to expand their market control, lead to high asymmetries in structural power, which, in turn, provide an extraordinary amount of bargaining power as well as direct access to resources for the transnational corporations sharing these oligopolies. It is highly questionable, whether any kind of political intervention would be able to balance these power asymmetries as long as the oligopolies are allowed to exist. Small farmers will never be able to organize as effectively and speak with as unified a voice as a handful of transnational corporations. In consequence, the most fundamental question to consider by public regulation is that of market structure and acceptable limits to corporate growth.

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